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ABSTRACT

One of a series of bulletins designed to aid social studies teachers, this issue serves as a guide in handling controversial issues in the classroom. The need for a policy statement from the local board of education is noted as the first step in allowing the free exchange of ideas. Considerations in deciding to study an issue are suggested: whether the issue is beyond the maturity level of the pupils; if it is of interest to them; if the teacher feels he can handle it from a personal standpoint; if adequate study materials can be obtained; if there is adequate time to justify its presentation; and if it will clash with community attitudes. A possible approach to controversial problems is broken into four aspects: preparation, introduction, investigation, and culmination. Special emphasis is on introductory techniques. The topic of appropriate pupil action in school and community is discussed as a natural outgrowth of the study of these issues. The teacher's role in working for consensus is observed as important in dealing with diverse opinions. A selected bibliography lists journal and yearbook articles from 1938 to the present. Related documents are SO 005 979 through SO 006 000. (KSM)

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How To Handle Controversial Issues

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RICHARD E. GROSS
Stanford University
Stanford, California

Need To Study Controversial Issues

The heart of the democratic process is found in the means by which as individuals and groups we come to grips with problems, work out our differences, and make our decisions. The free exchange of ideas is essential to the American system. In such a setting the responsibility of the schools is clear: They should provide experiences which lead to the attitudes and competencies needed by the citizen of a democratic state. The introduction into the classroom of purposefully planned studies of controversial issues, which help equip youth with the means by which they may resolve the problems that beset them, is one of the most promising aspects of present citizenship education programs.

There should be no question that American schools are to deal with important problems—social, economic, and political. In the United States such issues are an everyday experience. Yet there are taboo areas in the school curricula; these vary in number, kind, and intensity from one locality or region to another. However, a National Education Association survey which was conducted on a nationwide basis revealed these "hush-hush" areas to be quite common as far as the responding local school superintendents were concerned. The most controversial subjects that brought objections from various lay groups were religious education, sex education, local politics, communism, socialism, public ownership, national politics, race relations, labor management, the United Nations, and various aspects of local school policy and administration.[1]

Teachers organizations and national committees have reacted against the pressures brought by those who would limit the school's attention to vital issues. They have also warned that a self-imposed censorship by teachers with regard to controversial subjects endangers our educational objectives. Teachers should seek a clear statement of policy from their local board of education rather than, through fear and insecurity, purposely refrain from studying and discussing in class the important problems that beset our society. Such a policy statement that guarantees freedom to learn may be cooperatively arrived at by the formation of an advisory committee consisting of laymen, teachers, and administrators. A growing number of school systems are now operating with such policies in effect and the advisory committee and its policies serve to explain this essential aspect of democratic education to the community.[2] Working within this policy framework, teachers are also protected from the infringements of pressure groups, while the rights of the pupils to study and discuss significant issues in an objective atmosphere are assured. Local and national teachers organizations are also making resolutions endorsing the treatment of controversial issues in the schools.[3]

Criteria in the Selection of Controversial Issues for Class Study

What factors does the teacher have to consider in making a decision to study a controversial question brought up in his class? Taking for granted a permissive policy in the school, which is basic, he should consider seven criteria or possible limitations.

1. Is this issue beyond the maturity and experiential level of the pupils? Although problems can be studied even in the lower grades, teachers are wise to select

[1] See the booklet of National Education Association, Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom. *What Policies Should Guide the Handling of Controversial Issues?* Washington, D. C.: The Committee, 1954. 22 p.

[2] *Ibid.* A number of such statements are given as samples in this booklet.

[3] Typical are those of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the National Council for the Social Studies. "The Treatment of Controversial Issues in the Schools." *Social Education* 15: 232-36; May 1951, and "Freedom To Learn and Freedom To Teach." *Social Education* 17: 217-19; May 1953.

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those which the pupils are most likely to grasp in terms of their own background and readiness.

Some have questioned whether problems which society itself has been unable to solve should be introduced for pupil study. Many very real problems exist for young people which society has already solved on an adult level. It is wise to handle those topics upon which young people can act directly. It is also important to realize that youth needs a sound introduction to the problems that confront the nation. Will not the proper study of these difficult topics help develop some of the attitudes and techniques by which these important issues may eventually be resolved? Even if immediate action is impossible, it seems essential that young people on the threshold of citizenship should be aware of, and grapple with, aspects of unsolved problems such as inflation, crime and juvenile delinquency, medical care, conservation, civil rights, minorities, war, the role of the United States in the Middle East, and international organization. In many of these problem areas, as the study unfolds, the number and variety of opportunities which do develop for direct pupil action outside of the schoolroom is surprising. Actually as the pupils and teachers purposefully and coolly analyze and discuss these chronic issues and then take the necessary mutual steps in agreeing upon their solution, the school is initiating one of the most potent forces for cultural improvement that education has presented to any society. The beginnings of such competencies need to be laid in the elementary school. Children of all ages can and should discuss appropriate controversial issues.

2. Is this issue of interest to the pupils? The study of controversial problems like all other learning experiences needs motivation. If pupils as a group do not perceive the value of studying a given issue or are lukewarm toward it, the wise teacher will think twice before foisting such a topic upon them. Certainly it is best if pupils work on issues whose subject matter meets an immediate, felt need. Common sense, experience, and psychology agree on this point.

Related to this limitation is the question of the teacher's stressing issues or stimulating interest in problems which have not been apparent to the pupils. Certainly the teacher is obliged to act in such cases. This is part of his responsibility as a leader. If the issue meets the other six requirements in this list, a few well-placed questions or merely brief statements are often all that are necessary to spark pupil inquiry. Pupils are bound to overlook certain important implications of their lessons; this is especially true when working with groups of very homogeneous backgrounds.

3. Is this issue socially significant and timely for this course and grade level? One of the greatest difficulties in teaching is the selection of proper course content. Out of the vast number of possibilities for inclusion in the curriculum, the teacher needs to realize that certain approaches to subject matter are much more appropriate than others. In selecting issues, the objectives of a given subject, as well as the over-all educational aims, must be kept in mind. The point emphasized here is that vertical and horizontal planning concerning the scope and sequence of issues for possible study is needed so that unnecessary repetition is eliminated and necessary reinforcement or enlargement provided. It may be wise in some cases to postpone an issue which arises and which has been planned as part of a later unit. It is even possible that the English teacher might take up a problem which the social studies teacher is expected to cover the next semester in his classes. All teachers involved need to know what is going on in all classes.

4. Is this issue one which the teacher feels he can handle successfully from a personal standpoint? Some teachers may legitimately sense that they are unprepared to pursue a problem properly; for example, the teacher with little or no economics training who is faced with a discussion on the question of some complex labor legislation. A teacher may also feel that his own background has made him too biased to try to lead the class impartially in the study of a given issue.

There are some issues, however, on which the public does not expect the teacher to be impartial. The social studies teacher has been employed by society to maintain its basic values. He is not expected to hide continually behind a label of neutrality. His duty is to select and provide the learning experiences that are most appropriate in reaching educational aims.

Elements calling for teacher reinforcement include a number of values ranging from simple honesty to the sympathetic consideration of minority views. This may pose a real dilemma, for although the teacher is acting on behalf of the core cultural values, he must at the same time be cognizant of alternatives and opposing views and allow for their appearance in class discussion and study. Yet, the teacher who has faith in the democratic way *at* life and who displays an understanding of the implications of this system in his class organization and teaching techniques can proceed successfully.[1]

In what manner shall the teacher take his stand? His position should be as a learner among learners. He is not to set himself up as an authority. He is not to demand pupil acquiescence. He is not to seek blind indoctrination. He is not to use the clever means of the propagandist. He is not to misuse his position of responsibility and leadership for the promotion of personal causes.

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[1]For a discussion of the democratic way *at* life, see Otto, Max C. *Science and the Moral Life*. New York: The New American Library, 1949, Chapter 3, entitled "Realistic Idealism." (Adopted from *The Human Enterprise*.)

In many cases it is best for the teacher to refrain from stating his beliefs, or even the "accepted" views he is to maintain. It is only normal that his maturity and position as teacher would influence certain pupils to the extent that they would not do their own thinking. If he has a dynamic or engaging personality, he often needs to check the extent to which he is influencing his students. When pupils come to view his opinion as they would one of their peers, and see his statement in the critical light with which they would judge any other source, the teacher, when called upon can inject his views at most any point of the study. This healthy situation is not common, so if the instructor wishes to promote reflective consideration of significant issues it is often better to try to appear as a neutral leader or fellow investigator. Some teachers believe the best policy is to reserve their statements until the end of the discussion or the conclusion of the study. Then each teacher includes his opinion, with the reasons, in his summary account of the unit or project.

5. Is this issue one for which adequate study materials can be obtained? Especially when impromptu issues arise the teacher should make certain that adequate materials are available before starting a full scale study of the problem. A conference with the librarian may be in order. Materials should be used which are at the maturity and reading levels of the pupils. A variety of sources is preferred and, whenever possible, materials should be used which present all sides of an issue. Where materials are at hand which reflect only one view, the teacher must point this out and at times may need to explain the less common or unpopular cause in order to attain a well-balanced consideration. The danger is that pupils might interpret the teacher's balancing presentation as support for his own bias. This serves to point to the need for rapport in classrooms where controversial issues are to be discussed. There must be mutual confidence on the part of pupils and teacher, and proof in the teacher's leadership that he respects facts and acts accordingly in terms of his own value system. Where, however, enough pertinent materials are not available for a thorough study of a controversial issue, it is questionable whether the issue should be approached except as a "current event."

6. Is this issue one for which there is adequate time to justify its presentation? Just as pupil discussions of these issues should be much more than an exchange of opinions, so must there be adequate time provided for thorough study if sound conclusions and well-founded attitudes are to be formed. Seldom is it possible to conduct adequate study of a problem in a single week, let alone several class periods.

7. Is this issue one which will clash with community customs and attitudes? Perhaps the most important limitations upon the school's freedom in handling controversial issues are the local mores and the immediate climate of opinion. Issues can be so "hot" (a bitterly contested election) or conflict so with community traditions (religious or moral questions) that the teacher is only "cutting his own throat" to venture into such problems. There may be legitimate local or pupil needs for such study, but until the teacher has administrative and school board backing, the confidence of the parents, and a mandate from the majority of the community he can only work to gain this backing by leading his pupils into less controversial areas. Eventually he may win the necessary support to tackle the more pointed issues.

The teacher should become fully acquainted with the community in which he is employed. An understanding of power groups, strong religious and business forces, influential individuals, and the predominant racial and national backgrounds will be an invaluable aid in organizing a course of study and in choosing issues which might be studied. In schools which have advanced to the point of using lay and parental groups in their curricular planning, much of this selective process can be accomplished with ease.

When a teacher, alone, is faced with an important controversial issue which may be viewed with question by the community or an important segment of it, he need not always forego approaching the topic. This is especially true in connection with problems which the community does not oppose but which they are likely to misunderstand because of the tenor of the times. In such a situation the teacher and his administrator, after planning together, may appear before the PTA, local service clubs, or a church group as speakers on the topic, or they may merely ask for advice as to the school's role in this situation. In many instances, once properly interested and aroused, such groups have been known to urge and resolve that the schools study the issue without the teacher's ever having definitely suggested such procedure.

Current issues, planned or incidental, should be calibrated by the teacher like the degrees on a thermometer. Those that register about 212° in the local climate of opinion are usually best left alone. There are many valuable problems suitable for pupil exploration in the lower degrees of community temperature where no one is likely to get burned. The teacher knows that issues, like the weather, shift with the wind. Many, above the boiling point at one time, later drop to a more approachable position. Numerous questions, for example, cool considerably the day after an election. In other situations it may take a generation or longer, but the shift comes.

The Historical Approach to Controversial Issues

A controversial issue which arose in a history class developed over a question of States' Rights. The teacher immediately sensed that the problem might become too feverish to handle successfully. Accordingly, he used the

historical approach instead of a frontal and current attack. The detachment of this method, when used in connection with problems of a recurring or parallel nature, serves to help the teacher via a "back door" approach. The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, the Hartford Convention, the Tariff Affair of 1830—to mention just three examples—proved satisfactory media by which the teacher led the pupils to reach some basic understandings concerning the problem. This would have been difficult to gain in the immediate, emotionally charged atmosphere. Some of the problems and charges concerning subversive activities and individual rights can be approached objectively by leading to them through an historical treatment of events, judicial decisions, and an analysis of American mass psychology from the period of the Federalists' Alien and Sedition Acts to the developments following the Espionage and Sedition Acts during and after the first World War. The transfer of attitudes will not develop automatically, but such approaches can do much to clarify issues.

After viewing a problem in the perspective of years gone by, discussion may result which would have been impossible without the cooling effect of history. The treatment of Japanese-Americans during the second World War provides a possible means of approaching minority problems in some parts of the United States where the example of some other minority group could not be used. The teacher must be alert for such opportunities to use the appropriate parallels and backgrounds which history holds for the study of current issues. With such approaches, the discussion of present problems will provoke fewer misunderstandings; actually no issue can be studied adequately unless its cultural and historical roots are understood by the pupils.

Four Aspects of Approach

No universal set of rules can be listed for the successful handling of controversial issues. As with all methods, variations depend upon the instructor and school facilities, while at the same time the issue itself may alter the pattern of study. In general, however, the program for approaching controversial problems can be broken into four aspects: preparation, introduction, investigation, and culmination.

Preparation

Most of the preparatory duties have already been indicated. Such planning and organization is essential. Necessary attention to these initial factors will do much to insure a profitable venture into controversial areas.

Introduction

The exact steps in the second or introductory phase will vary with class and topic. The teacher has, nevertheless, several important responsibilities in every situation. He must see that the class perceives the objectives in the study; that it really understands the issues involved and their implications. "Why should we study this problem?" "Where will this lead us, both as individuals and as a group?" These are two questions to be asked in all cases, once the problem itself has been clearly defined. The definition of words and of each point of view is of prime importance. Problems of semantics are vital in controversial areas; meanings must be clear in order that topics can be managed. In this way all concerned will know what each is talking about. Often, after such clarification, pupils may realize that they are close to accord, and harmony may be reached with little further difficulty.

In this phase of the study the pro's and con's, the arguments underlying each point of view, should be listed by the group. The teacher or class chairman can run two columns down the blackboard and gather pupil statements under each heading. Original hypotheses will now crystallize. Challenges will be made and pupils will begin to realize the difference between opinion and fact and the need for substantiating evidence. With pupil-teacher planning, the class can next decide upon the specific methods and program to be used in studying the problem. The gathering of opposing views suggested above may preferably come during the third or investigation phase when individual pupils or committees report back their findings as they prepare to appraise the data they have collected.

During the introductory phase, pupils are led to try to answer two more basic questions; in addition to settling "just what is the problem," they become involved in "just why is this a problem."

Precise stages have been outlined in detail upon numerous occasions to guide teachers in training their pupils in the steps of critical thinking.[5] As individuals and as a group, social studies pupils should have regular experience in this objective method of using reason to solve problems. Following these procedures, pupils learn to base their conclusions upon facts. They come to understand multiple causation. They learn to withhold judgment. They learn how to gather and sift conflicting data. Pupils undergo some of the same experiences in other courses which emphasize logical induction and deduction and training in the scientific method. They make inestimable gains toward the improvement of their own lives, as well as ultimately strengthening society, by such application.

As early as possible in their school years, pupils need to come to understand the difficulties involved in approaching and solving human problems, as compared with overcoming the simple problems that are also met daily in and out of the classroom. In the latter situation the selection of the proper formula or the location of the trou-

[5]Several of the many valuable articles and publications, besides John Dewey's *How We Think*. New York: D. C. Heath and Co., 1933. 301 p., include the pamphlet, *Teaching Controversial Issues*. Columbus, Ohio: The Junior Town Meeting League (400 South Front Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215), and *Problem Solving*. Detroit, Mich.: (The Citizenship Education Study) Wayne University Press, 1948.

ble, be it a lost screw or a bent wire, serves to define the problem and point out the solution. The solution of human problems, with their clashing points of view and varied values, calls for something beyond critical thinking—a form of compromise of conflicting personal and group dispositions which results from a mutual consensus of ideals. No such issue can be solved until its causes have been identified and dealt with, but pupils need to see that upon many an occasion the problem is clear and that after suitable study the remedial steps are also evident, yet the issue remains to plague society. Agreement cannot be reached because individuals cannot or will not adjust their attitudes so that mutual reconstruction of differing points of view is possible. It is experience with this aspect of approaching controversial issues that has been most neglected in the classroom attempts to probe and solve social problems.

Therefore, one of the central clues to the solution of controversial issues, as well as for their successful handling, is the spirit in which they are approached. When no common values or points of agreement become evident and the desire to work together is missing, the chances for any resolution of differences are almost nonexistent.

In courses in which attention is given to living issues, pupils may be expected to meet, regularly, one-sided opinions and to come into contact with biased materials which were written with no thought of compromise or any mutual reconstruction of views. In the face of such conditions, especially with the many cleverly concealed attempts to influence the mind, pupils need experience in propaganda analysis. Several class periods spent discussing current magazine and newspaper advertisements brought to the classroom, studying cartoons in the same publications, and dissecting the syndicated columns of some of the vitriolic journalists will bring heavy dividends in clear thinking, once the propaganda techniques have been revealed.[6] Such studies can be extended most profitably into full units where the pupils reproduce such materials themselves, criticize recorded election speeches and commentators' statements concerning the news, and watch editorials and news columns for partial truths, evasions, improper analogies, and other such practices akin to outright propaganda. These days when so many agencies are offering their printed materials for use in the schools, pupils should be trained to question, "Who writes this?" "Who is paying for this?" "What are the purposes of presenting this material in written form?" The same attitudes can be encouraged by having them question, in connection with their normal channels of information and communication in the home and community, "Who owns this?" "Do they always present both sides?" "Is the news ever slanted?" "If so, why?" In the day of the mass dissemination of news, the declining influence of independent, locally owned publications, the quickie news capsule of one form or another which "conveniently eliminates time-consuming detail" and of the cut and edited radio interview, movie newsreel, or television production, pupils need to be constantly more alert to the problems of finding and understanding the facts and of the difficulties involved in drawing accurate generalizations.

The teacher in this area also needs to help pupils overcome the erroneous thinking which appears so frequently in discussions concerning social questions. Assignments formed to dislodge belief in the single cause, ethnocentric views, stereotyped opinions, the either/or fallacy, and the like will be most valuable in extending the possibilities, not only for clear thinking but also for agreement.

Investigation

Much of what has been discussed here applies to the third phase of the study of controversial issues. This period of investigation is usually the longest, and it is here that the pupils carry out the research which leads to the culmination of the study.

Some of the greatest hurdles to overcome in aiding pupils to think through controversial questions lie in helping the pupils to gain an understanding of just why they hold a given position, the possible fallacies involved, and in aiding them to understand opposing views and their bases. The alert teacher regularly encourages his pupils to write frank answers to questions such as the following: "What are all the reasons behind my viewpoint?" "Why do I find this position most satisfying?" "How can I prove it best?" "What are the strong points of the other argument?" "Just why do my protagonists hold their views?" Such questions can also be the basis for valuable class discussions.

One of the most promising techniques for gaining an understanding of the other fellow is the use of roleplaying. Many individuals are surprised when they find how well they can cast themselves in the position held by the opposing camp when playing such a role in a sociodrama. A teen-ager can bring himself to see many points in the adult argument when, temporarily a parent, he defends sensible hours for sleep, nondrinking by minors, limitation in the use of the family car, or any other of the myriad of problems which can cause friction between youth and their parents. With the proper background reading and preparation, pupils can be just as effective in developing a mock political debate, a UN committee hearing, or a labor-management bargaining session. Regular skits and dramatizations can be used in these situations but are not believed to be as valuable as the sociodrama in gaining the understanding and changed attitudes which are desired.[7]

[6] For a description of the various propaganda techniques, see Lee, Alfred, and Lee, Elizabeth, editors. *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939. 140 p.

[7] See Zeleny, Leslie D. *How To Use Sociodrama*. How To Do It Series, No. 20. Washington, D. C.: National Council for the Social Studies, a department of the National Education Association. Revised edition, 1964. 8 p.

Pupils and teachers can decide upon the manner in which they are going to investigate the problem and upon the form of presentation of the data which they will collect. Whether the plan followed includes individual, committee, or total class investigation, or some combination of these, will again depend upon the issue, the school's environment, and the availability and kinds of resource materials. Where there is no school library or an inadequate one, as well as a lack of materials in the classroom, individuals or committees often must operate outside of the school. Common techniques include the use of resources in the community, from field trips and the interviewing of both interested and disinterested parties, including parents where feasible, to the writing of letters for information and the perusal of public records of local businesses or governmental agencies. Of course, such activities are also very valuable and help to motivate even when varied and adequate materials are available in the school. Judicious combinations of research techniques are more nearly possible when the classroom is organized as a social studies laboratory, the ideal situation towards which forward-looking social studies teachers are striving. In such an atmosphere, with the majority of materials at hand, the class can shift with ease from individual research and small group conferences to a meeting of the committee as a whole. A designated group may engage in special research, and the rest can then turn to formal committee meetings without many of the time-wasting and distracting elements that can mark such pupil movements from room to room. The place of and need for democratic teacher-pupil experiences, with shared planning and responsibilities, is evident; but each teacher must appraise his group and decide upon the extent to which he can initiate such practices or work towards their acceptance.

During the investigation period with its ensuing discussions the teacher, in addition to being alert for evidences of incorrect thinking, loose generalizations, and outright errors in fact, has further responsibilities. He should help keep group discussion centered upon the point at issue, help maintain calm when emotions rise, see that all sides have equal opportunities to present their ideas, draw the timid into the discussion, and help plan or he himself should present fair summarizations of the class findings or conclusions. In all of this, he remains a director of learning but his leadership is inconspicuous.

Culmination

Probably no class should try to follow each problem or unit in the same manner. When the group assembles for the culmination—the final discussion and appraisal of the facts gathered concerning the issue—they and the teacher are faced once more with the problem of presentation. Again, a number of excellent and varied techniques for organization are available; included are individual reports, committee reports of different types, panels, round tables, open class discussions, and audio-visual presentations such as graphic blackboard and photographic bulletin board displays. Student playlets, sometimes recorded on tapes, are also used. Some teachers report success with modified debate forms, while others stay away from that approach, feeling that some of the aims and techniques associated with debates are not conducive to the type of mutual thinking toward agreement which is necessary in resolving controversial issues. As with the techniques used by the class while finding the facts, a combination of the approaches suggested above is often possible.

As the evidence is presented, final hypotheses appear or are suggested and the class in most cases should draw individual and group conclusions. Varied procedure is again possible, depending upon the issue. Often the problem is personal and no final voiced opinion should be sought. In many cases a show of hands will suffice, while in others a secret ballot should be taken. At this point, teachers upon too many occasions discover that they have failed to shake ill-founded positions and to gain the altered attitudes which can bring consensus and settlement. The real test comes in most cases in the resulting pupil action in school and community; this is what counts. The teacher should lead the group to test their conclusions by making this transfer and application as individuals. It is seldom the place for a class on behalf of the school to take group action in the community, by attempting to settle a controversial problem. However, in some open-minded localities where there are community-centered schools, or in situations where the pupils are dealing with a low-temperature problem, direct school relationship toward solution or improvement of the condition is possible and has occurred with dramatic results.*

When Is Pupil Action Possible?

How and where is pupil action based upon their social studies possible? Most valuable are the adjustments in behavior and attitude reflected in the pupils' own immediate lives, whether the case be adjusted vocational plans or a new group policy toward admitting present out-group pupils into a hitherto restricted club. Throughout the school, evidence can be observed of the efficacy of attempting to resolve issues and of the value of experiences in rational thinking; in the student council, in class elections, in the cafeteria, and in the halls—here is where teachers must watch to find the real results of their teaching. More difficult are the observations of behavior in the community. Tests are being constructed and improved which can help the teacher measure some of the attitudinal developments that he has been seeking for his pupils. In some schools a practice is made of regularly holding assemblies in which a class dealing with a particular

*See, for example, some of the published reports by schools and teachers who have been involved in the Citizenship Education Project.

issue can bring its work to a most valuable culmination by presenting a forum or a Junior Town Meeting related to the topic. Sometimes these are presented over local radio stations. Television now also provides an opportunity for pupils to bring their thinking to the attention of the community. Wherever practical, pupil follow-ups upon their decisions outside of the school are most worthwhile. These may vary from writing a letter to a congressman to trying, during a family discussion, to gain parental understanding of a viewpoint which is different from their own. Pupil interest remains high when issues are studied which allow them to make social contributions—resulting in more satisfactory lives for themselves. It is also beneficial when the pupils' attempts to resolve the question help them to gain understanding of the greater problems involved as well as to point out the next or possible further areas of investigation for their class. Whether this follows immediately or is reserved for some future date or even a higher grade level depends upon the issue and the flexibility of the school program.

Certainly pupils cannot solve or even act upon all of the issues they consider. In connection with chronic issues, they can learn to gain satisfaction from having come to a fuller knowledge of the conditions. In working with such questions, the knowledge of having tried their best must suffice on some occasions. Often from such studies pupils come to believe that, if only the adults in the community had tried harder, many more satisfactory solutions would have been reached. They should also emerge from the study of controversial questions with more of the skills with which they may resolve these and other such issues and with a concern for, and a desire to share in, the tasks of their age.

Working for Consensus

The school promotes such attitudes in several ways, as indicated before, but the most promising is through experience with the technique which goes even beyond what is known as compromise. Although compromise is sometimes successful—for example, in the formation of legislation—in other cases it is only superficial and temporary at best. Each side may have given in but attitudes have not altered, causal factors may not have been removed, and neither party has come to an understanding of the new position it needs to take or of the factors involved in settling the issue. The method of consensus should be employed by the teacher on all appropriate occasions during the study of a problem whenever he sees some chance for aiding the opposing parties to find common grounds whereby the conflict may be resolved. This is the practical method of helping the individuals involved to find a common value or values. Often these values are reflected in the statements of both groups. Starting from this point, a group may arrive at agreement and solution. Each group has found that the other has a mutual predisposition or ideology from which it can develop broadened, common ends as the areas of concern are jointly enlarged.

A class, for instance, may divide sharply on the question of a national health plan. As soon as the issue is mentioned, emotions, prejudices, positively and negatively charged symbols, and stereotypes come into every mind. Pupil knowledge of such predispositions in their thinking will not solve the problem in itself. Long discussion and the presentation of voluminous facts will fail to shake the opinions of numerous pupils who have only thought and studied in an attempt to bolster their own, original positions. What is needed here? The teacher should help the groups to discover common elements and values which both can accept. Probably both groups will agree upon the necessity of individual citizens with healthy minds and bodies as important to the nation. Here is the place to begin. Next, as the group studies and discusses, the exchange of ideas and the modification of views begins to occur on both sides, and this may bring eventual consensus as, step by step, similar points of concern appear. Meanwhile, both groups will have altered much of their original position; those who opposed any further extension of governmental responsibility into the areas of public health may now see the need and place for some such help, while those who favored a rather completely socialized plan may have found the dangers and difficulties and will have adjusted their principles to accept a modified, middle-of-the-road position. This democratic means of the creative solution of conflict, characterized by the mutual reconstruction of differing points of view, needs to become a common experience for all young people throughout their elementary and secondary school careers.

When the opportunities present themselves, the school can promote the method of consensus in its contacts with other social institutions and community groups. In working with diverse elements and in helping them find areas of possible agreement where mutual understandings and even friendships emerge, the school, its pupils, and its graduates are providing a great social service. From these satisfying harmonious experiences people with views which are even more pointed and different will have come to trust one another and will be willing to work together in arriving at needed solutions of the more difficult community problems.

It is evident that the unique contribution of the study of controversial affairs to societal improvement is twofold: It brings a sense of dedication to the total democratic way as well as proficiency in those means by which mankind can approach more closely the full democracy of which it has dreamed so long. The freedom to teach controversial issues is, therefore, a responsibility which American teachers must never surrender.

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